



Designation: E340 – 23

Standard Practice for Macroetching Metals and Alloys¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation E340; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon (ε) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

This standard has been approved for use by agencies of the U.S. Department of Defense.

1. Scope

1.1 These procedures describe the methods of macroetching metals and alloys to reveal their macrostructure.

1.2 The values stated in inch-pound units are to be regarded as standard. The values given in parentheses are mathematical conversions to the International System (SI) units that are provided for information only and are not considered standard.

1.3 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety, health, and environmental practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.* For specific warning statements, see [6.2](#), [7.1](#), [8.1.3](#), [8.2.1](#), [8.8.3](#), [8.10.1.1](#), and [8.13.2](#). It is further recommended to review the guidance in Guide [E2014](#).

1.4 *This international standard was developed in accordance with internationally recognized principles on standardization established in the Decision on Principles for the Development of International Standards, Guides and Recommendations issued by the World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

[E3](#) Guide for Preparation of Metallographic Specimens

[E381](#) Method of Macroetch Testing Steel Bars, Billets, Blooms, and Forgings

[E2014](#) Guide on Metallographic Laboratory Safety

3. Significance and Use

3.1 *Applications of Macroetching:*

¹ This test method is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee [E04](#) on Metallography and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee [E04.01](#) on Specimen Preparation.

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² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

3.1.1 Macroetching is used to reveal the heterogeneity of metals and alloys. Metallographic specimens and chemical analyses will provide the necessary detailed information about specific localities, but they cannot give data about variation from one place to another unless an inordinate number of specimens are taken.

3.1.2 Macroetching, on the other hand, will provide information on variations in (1) structure, such as grain size, flow lines, columnar structure, dendrites, and so forth; (2) variations in chemical composition as evidenced by segregation, carbide and ferrite banding, coring, inclusions, and depth of carburization or decarburization. The information provided about variations in chemical composition is strictly qualitative but the location of extremes in segregation will be shown. Chemical analyses or other means of determining the chemical composition would have to be performed to determine the extent of variation. Macroetching will also show the presence of discontinuities and voids, such as seams, laps, porosity, flakes, bursts, extrusion rupture, cracks, and so forth.

3.1.3 Other applications of macroetching in the fabrication of metals are the study of weld structure, definition of weld penetration, dilution of filler metal by base metals, entrapment of flux, porosity, and cracks in weld and heat affected zones, and so forth. It is also used in the heat-treating shop to determine location of hard or soft spots, tong marks, quenching cracks, case depth in shallow-hardening steels, case depth in carburization, effectiveness of stop-off coatings in carburization, and so forth. In the machine shop, it can be used for the determination of grinding cracks in tools and dies.

3.1.4 Macroetching is used extensively for quality control in the steel industry, to determine the *tone* of a heat in billets with respect to inclusions, segregation, and structure. Forge shops, in addition, use macroetching to reveal flow lines in setting up the best forging practice, die design, and metal flow. For an example of the use of macroetching in the steel forging industry see Method [E381](#). Forging shops and foundries also use macroetching to determine the presence of internal faults and surface defects. The copper industry uses macroetching for control of surface porosity in wire and bar. In the aluminum industry, macroetching is used to evaluate extrusions as well as the other products such as forgings, sheets, and so forth. Defects such as coring, cracks, and porthole die welds are identified.

4. Sampling

4.1 As in any method of examination, sampling is very important. When macroetching is used to solve a problem, the problem itself largely dictates the source of the sample as to the location on the work piece and the stage of manufacture; for example, when looking for pipe, the sample should represent the top of the ingot, or when looking for bursts or flakes, the sample should be taken as soon after hot working as possible.

4.2 When macroetching is used as an inspection procedure, sampling ought to be done in an early stage of manufacturing so that, if the material proves faulty, no wasteful unnecessary work is done. However, the sample should not be taken so early that further working can introduce serious defects. In the steel industry, for example, the sample is usually taken after ingot breakdown and after most chances of bursts or flakes occurring have passed. Billets or blooms going into small sizes are sampled after initial breakdown. Material going into forging billets or die blocks is sampled near the desired finish size. Sampling may be done systematically or on a random basis.

4.3 Samples may be cold cut from the source by any convenient method; saws and abrasive cutoff wheels are particularly effective. Torch cutting or hot cutting should be used only when necessary to cut a sample from a large piece. The sample then is sectioned well away from the hot-cut surface. An example of permissible use of torch cutting is the excising of a piece from a large plate and then cutting a sample for macroetching 4 in. to 5 in. (102 mm to 127 mm) away from the torch-cut edge.

4.4 Some common methods of sampling, listed by source, are as follows:

4.5 *Billets, Blooms, and Hot-Rolled Products*—Disks are usually cut from these products near the end. Samples cut too close to the end, however, may have false structures because of fish-tailing. Disks from large blooms are sometimes cut into smaller pieces for ease in handling.

4.5.1 *Forgings and Extrusions*—Disks cut transverse to the long dimension will show flakes, bursts, and so forth. Forgings may also be cut parallel to the long dimension to show flow lines. In complicated forgings, some thought will have to be given to the proper method of cutting so as to show flow lines. Macroetching of an unprepared specimen will show surface defects such as shuts, flats, seams, and so forth. In extrusions, coring and coarse grain are more commonly found in the back end of the extrusion.

4.5.2 *Sheets and Plates*—A sufficiently large sample should be taken when looking for surface defects. An ideal length would be the circumference of the last roll, but this may be inconveniently long. Several samples totaling some given fraction of the circumference can be used; however, there is always a chance then that a defect arising from faulty rolls would not be detected. When seeking information on laminations, a transverse section is used. In many cases, however, to reduce the size of the specimen, only a section out of the center of the plate may be taken.

4.5.3 *Weldments*—A disk cut perpendicular to the direction of welding will show weld penetration, heat affected zone,

structure, and so forth. Careful preparation is usually rewarded with highly detailed structures giving a large amount of information. Welds involving dissimilar metals will produce problems in etching. The best method is to etch the least corrosion-resistant portion first and the more resistant portion afterwards. Occasionally, an intermediary etchant may be required. The boundaries between etched and unetched portion will give an idea of weld penetration and dilution.

4.5.4 *Castings*—Cut the specimen to display the defect or feature being sought.

4.5.5 *Machined and Ground Parts*—When looking for grinding cracks, and so forth, the surface itself is used as a sample. Because the machined or ground part is often the finished part, it may be undesirable to immerse the part in acid. In this case, other methods such as dye penetrant methods may be more desirable.

5. Preparation

5.1 Sample preparation need not be elaborate. Any method of presenting a smooth surface with a minimum amount of cold work will be satisfactory. Disks may be faced on a lathe or a shaper. The usual procedure is to take a roughing cut, then a finish cut. This will generate a smooth surface and remove cold work from prior operations. Sharp tools are necessary to produce a good specimen. Grinding is usually conducted in the same manner, using free-cutting wheels and light finishing cuts. When fine detail is required, the specimen should be ground down through the series of metallographic papers (see Guide E3). Where necessary, details are given in Tables 1-14.

5.2 Care should be taken to examine the surface before and after etching to ensure induced damage from surface preparation does not interfere with analysis. Specific guidance is included in the following sections.

5.3 After surface preparation, the sample is cleaned carefully with suitable solvents. Any grease, oil, or other residue will produce an uneven etch response. Once cleaned, care should be taken not to touch the sample surface or contaminate it in any way.

6. Solutions

6.1 The solutions used for macroetching are given in the tables listed under each alloy. In most cases a laboratory grade of reagent should be used. Technical grades may provide satisfactory results. The solution should be clean and clear, free of suspended particles, scum, and so forth. Solutions may lose effectiveness through age or reuse, and should be replaced if not performing consistently.

6.2 Caution must be observed in mixing. Many of the etchants are strong acids. In all cases, the various chemicals should be added slowly to the water or solvent while stirring. In the cases where hydrofluoric acid is used, the solution should be mixed and used in polyethylene vessels. (**Warning**—Hydrofluoric acid must not be allowed to contact the skin.)

7. Procedure

7.1 Many of the solutions are aggressive and may give off irritating and corrosive fumes. Etching should be done in a